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E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/21/2016

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SUBJECT: (C) KRG MINISTER OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS ON MONITORING MOSQUES,
CHECKING FOREIGN INFLUENCES

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jim Bigus, PRT Leader, POL, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY: Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA) for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Mohammad Ahamd Saeed Shakaly, said on August 8 that his ministry monitored more than 3000 mosques in the Kurdistan region and that checking sermons was a matter of "public security" for the KRG areas. He claimed MARA had a system to legally prosecute imams who incited violence and that no mosques could be built or operated without MARA authorization. He said MARA was trying to limit the influence of foreign Islamic groups in the area that had increased between 2003 and 2005. MARA relations with their Baghdad counterparts were with the Sunni department mostly, which was separate from the Shia department. Shakaly said MARA wanted to form a committee for religious affairs composed of non-Islamic religious minorities to monitor the relation between Islam and other religions, and that his ministry would head the committee. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

(C) 3000 MOSQUES MONITORED - NO BARZANI CRITICISM ALLOWED

12. (C) Shakaly claimed his ministry currently monitored about 3000 mosques but that this figure was increasing. Several members of his staff had family members who had been victims of suicide bombers, he said, and this was a sensitive issue. He said their priorities were to contribute to regional stability and the peace of the KRG, and to this end, he claimed MARA would not permit the mosque to become a shelter for terrorists. Mosque sermons, Shakaly said, must not incite violence or call for jihad. He claimed outside of these issues mosques could practice as they wish, but that otherwise they would be prosecuted through the law. He added as an afterthought MARA also did not permit criticism of the Barzanis.

(C) CHECKING SERMONS A "PUBLIC SECURITY ISSUE"

13. (C) Shakaly said some imams advocated stoning cars that had women drivers, which could cause an accident. He claimed this made cracking down on such sermons a "public security issue" and in such cases MARA must take away their permission to speak. He said MARA actively was trying to open dialogue with Islamic extremists to see what they want and to bring them to the table to convince them to abandon violence. Shakaly cited the Hajj Ibrahim Mosque on the main road to Qoya in Erbil as a main culprit in disseminating extremist sermons. MARA only had authority in areas falling under KRG administration, he claimed;

other regions, such as Kirkuk, fell under Baghdad's supervision.

(C) "WE HAVE WAYS" TO SILENCE UNWANTED SERMONS

14. (C) Shakaly said the process of monitoring sermons was facilitated by the fact that most of the 10,000 to 11,000 MARA staff also worked as mosque employees, but that there was in addition "always street talk" to alert them of dangerous rhetoric. Shakaly claimed the "democratic ways of the west sometimes can't be implemented in Kurdistan" due to inherent cultural differences. He said the political impact of Islam had not yet arrived in the Kurdish areas due to the influences of Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufism, which were peaceful movements and heavily influenced the region. However, because of their possible connections with extremists, Shakaly claimed, constant vigilance was necessary and MARA had to use its own methods to solve the problem, because the ministry did not want Kurdistan "to become like other Islamic countries." As an example, he claimed an imam recently compared Kurdistan's education and government systems to "pharaoh" and MARA responded by inviting him to their offices to discuss this, and warned him to avoid such rhetoric or he would have his permit to speak taken away and would be judicially prosecuted by the government. Shakaly said mosques could no longer be built without MARA approval and that imams were not permitted to preach without a license from MARA. He claimed MARA recently moved two colleges, one for sharia education and the other for sermon training, from the more conservative and remote areas of Dahuk to Salahadin University in Erbil, where MARA could monitor and instruct imams on how to cleanse their sermons of extremist rhetoric. He added mullahs were using old books and references and that MARA was trying to reform this curriculum.

(C) FORMING MINORITY COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

15. (C) One of MARA's priorities, Shakaly claimed, would be to

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monitor the relations between Islam and other religions in the Kurdistan regions of Iraq. Formerly called the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Shakaly claimed the change in title indicated this shift in concern for non-Islamic religious communities. He said a specific law was under consideration to form a "high committee for religious affairs" and that his ministry would soon submit this bill to the KRG Council of Ministers and the Kurdistan National Assembly for approval. He said the law would create a committee of solely non-Islamic minority communities, such as Yezidis and Assyrians, to make sure "anything done for the Muslims also gets done for the other communities." If MARA builds a mosque for the Muslims, Yezidis would have a right to a temple, the Christians to a church, he claimed. Shakaly said someone from his office would head the committee.

(C) CHECKING FOREIGN INFLUENCES

16. (C) A limited KRG budget had permitted foreign groups, primarily from Gulf States, to found mosques and finance groups without oversight, Shakaly claimed. These foreign groups, he said, focused on high profile areas to gain the maximum exposure. He claimed between 2003 and 2005 an Islamic college in Saudi Arabia built or purchased 430 mosques in the Kurdistan region, mostly on the main paved roads. He asserted that in some villages with over 100 families they did not build, but in some with only 3 families they built a mosque because of its strategic location. Shakaly claimed now any mosque construction had to be channeled through MARA according to law. These groups had come under the face of Islam, he said, but had a hidden goal to assist terrorists. Since they already had a large number of mosques, he claimed, there was no need for more; they should focus on building schools and hospitals. Many of these 430 mosques were still open, Shakaly claimed, but were now funded and maintained by MARA, which had "gradually dried up"

funding for suspected mosques. He cited the Salaf Mosque and the Khaliya Kubra Mosque as examples. Shakaly claimed any new mosques built by foreign donors must have their organization approved, although MARA did not keep track of funding or banking sources.

(C) RELATIONS WITH BAGHDAD MOSTLY WITH SUNNIS

¶7. (C) Shakaly claimed MARA's counterparts in Baghdad were divided between Sunni and Shia departments, and that MARA had a "very thin" relation with the Shia department. He said, for instance, that MARA had helped in coordinating with Baghdad on the Hajj to Mecca, and that the KRG had a representative on the Committee for the Hajj in Baghdad to facilitate visas, passports, and logistics. However, he said, as this represented pilgrims from the mostly Sunni Kurdistan region, MARA's contact primarily was with the Sunni branch of the federal ministry. Shakaly claimed that even though the relatively small Shia Kurdish population had Husayniyah, not mosques, and were financially independent from the KRG endowments system, the Husayniyah must still register with MARA.

(C) BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

¶8. (C) Mohammad Ahmad Saeed Shakaly: Current KRG Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs; has worked in politics since 1963 when he became a Peshmerga; lived in Kirkuk most of his life and owns a farm there; claims to speak Turkoman and Arabic fluently; was targeted by terrorists while attending a mosque; his senior advisor is Othman al-Mufti.

(U) COMMENT

¶9. (C) Post had heard concerns voiced from representatives of Islamic groups that the KRG's crackdown on these parties and mosques is not eliminating extremists but rather driving them underground. If these claims are true, efforts by the KRG to check the influence of radical Islam could contribute to future, more lethal threats to political stability in the Kurdish regions, particularly if these parties are enjoying growing popular support. Based on post's meetings with Assyrian leaders, a level of distrust exists regarding the KRG's plans for the future of non-Muslim minority communities in the Kurdistan region. While MARA's proposed "high committee for religious affairs" could serve to ameliorate this distrust, it could also serve as another mechanism for MARA to extend its monitoring of religious activities to non-Islamic communities. Shakaly's comment that certain Islamic groups had "no need for more" mosques and thus would not receive funding to build more could logically apply to non-Muslim communities on the grounds

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that MARA had ceased to build new mosques, so it would not be fair to approve new temples or churches.
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